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Social Role of Theatre – From Antiquity to Modern Times

Abstract

In every historical period man makes attempts to gain control over the world of nature in order to create the best possible conditions for their day-to-day existence. Yet, it happens that an individual's endeavours do not bring the intended and expected results. As a consequence, people experience a series of difficulties they do not always find easy to deal with. In such a situation a human being looks for solutions which will allow them to find their place yet again in different fields of life, help them carry out their plans and fulfil their needs.

This text presents the ways in which people created theatre to cater for their needs over the centuries, how they have made use of it and how it may be of help to them today in their daily lives.

Key words: *theatre, social role of theatre, needs fulfilment, theatre education.*

There is an established conviction in modern society that the times we live in are unique and special. We formulate such opinions with reference to the past, implying – sometimes unintentionally – that the past was less unique. Meanwhile, our judgement does not take into account the fact that every historical period was as unique and exceptional for the societies of the time as modernity is for us.

Such glorification of reality may be explained by means of the scale and dynamics of the ongoing transformations, progress of civilization or findings of science and technology which facilitate everyday life. Progress, which is originally supposed to lead to an improvement of the living conditions, has always been accompanied, even in the remote past, by negative phenomena, which people have tried to eliminate or whose effects they have tried to minimize. In order to do that they have

looked for different solutions and turned to different institutions offering aid and support so as to effectively counteract evil.

Over the centuries offers of support for a person in a difficult situation have undergone changes, gradually expanding the array of forms and methods of aid. Among the many institutions which were deliberately founded to carry out such activities we can find one which was originally supposed to serve an entirely different purpose. It was only later, with the passing of time that people found out how many different roles pertaining to the human aid context it plays. This institution is theatre, an institution which not only tries to respond to man's cultural needs, but also serves prophylactic and compensation functions.

Theatre is a space in which art "happens". Arthur Schopenhauer used to say that art brings relief in suffering. Contemplating art and experiencing beauty calms our physical drives. We get to know the reality around us through contemplation, through aesthetic approach, through art. Therefore, aesthetics and art, which are important components of philosophy, have become "the surest means of escape from the misery of life and instruments of the most profound cognition" (Tatarkiewicz, 1987, p. 222).

Theatre is life and as a form of human activity it has accompanied man since time immemorial. Its magic and greatness consists in a complete visualization of reality and maintenance of theatre's secret at the same time. It was true for primitive peoples "expressing themselves" mainly by means of pantomime and it is true for our times with their plethora of artistic forms present in modern theatre. If theatre is not as old as humanity then it means that it must have been a vital need of human beings.

Everyday life with its good and evil has always provided inspiration for performances. Over the centuries the only things which have changed were the forms of presentation, the forms of expressing emotions, the actor's equipment with costumes and stage props.

Dance used to be the primeval form of theatrical expression. In primitive communities it used to express specific life needs: religion, security, abundant crops or initiation rites. Thus, dance had the meaning of request, sacrifice, or it simply expressed emotions.

Generally, people seek the beginnings of European theatre in ancient Greece and rightly so, although it is impossible to pass over the legacy of Egypt or the ancient East, whose later contribution to the enrichment and development of dramatic art was considerable.

The first performances of the Greek theatre referred to the sphere of religion. Dionysus cult rites were presented, which took on a form of joint folk play. Dra-

matic art historians are almost unanimous in their agreement that such frolics, which lasted for several days, marked the beginning of the development of tragedy and comedy and Dionysus became known as the god of theatre (Berthold, 1980, p. 106).

Ancient Greece was an example of a community of gods and people and regardless of significant political and social divisions it was successfully maintained and created not only by theatre performances, but also by the games. The primary aim of those events was the attainment of a sense of togetherness and community, which was a peculiar value in itself and which provided people with a feeling of security and belonging.

In the Middle Ages secular theatre emerged from the universally functioning religious theatre of the time. Its dominant forms were farces and morality plays. Describing reality and expressing one's opinions on stage became so popular that it did not only boil down to presenting everyday life in the form of theatre performances, but also to inviting the local community to take part in the shows. The plays staged reflected the epoch and showed numerous vices of society, such as drunkenness, salaciousness or problems with the upbringing of youth.

In the period of the Renaissance a strictly dramatic theatre emerged, which staged the plays of recognized playwrights. Theatre gained greater and greater universal acclaim, especially that of the elites. Hence, it became an intrinsic element of almost all big European cities.

Parallel to it, "folk" theatre developed, which staged pastoral plays performed by itinerant artists. The venues of performances were usually accidental, the decisive factor being the presence of potential spectators in a given place. Thus, in order to get the chance to present one's skills to the widest possible audience, the plays were staged outdoors. Such a form made it possible to satisfy – at least to some extent – the social, emotional, educational and entertainment needs of the lowest social class. It also served as a confirmation or a signal that theatre as a rule should not be an elitist form of art, but instead it should be made available to all social groups. Unfortunately, such views have to be popularized once again in modern times and there are still people who do not share them.

School theatre, which came into being at that time, played an important role in the creation of *social* theatre. Its basic value was the fact that it presented student life, drawing the audience's attention both to its positive aspects, as well as to all the improprieties or dangers threatening the schoolboys. Its main advantage was the assumption or even the message conveyed that such a form of theatre should educate the young generation.

Martin Luther emphasized the educational role of theatre, when he wrote in his *Table Talk*:

“Out of consideration for boys one should not forbid staging comedies at school, but on the contrary, one should allow it in order for the boys to practise their Latin and due to the fact that comedies in a splendid and masterful way depict characters who are of great value to one’s education and who remind one about their class and profession and teach what befits a servant, a gentleman, a young man and an old man and what their conduct should look like (Berthold, 1980, p. 301).

The 16th century is a period of significant historical events, which changed the social and political order in Europe. Theatre played an important part in those transformations. Thanks to the authors and artists, theatre stage turned into an instrument of cognition, a place to come to for advice and instructions on how to lead one’s life and what to do with it. Authors of theatrical art were more and more aware of the role theatre could and should play in society. The foundation of national theatres in many European countries dates back to that period of time as well. The national stage was supposed to present the customs and traditions prevailing in a given country. Its development reached its height at the time of Romanticism. Referring to the example of Romantic Poland, it should be noted that dramas which sprang up then were to raise people’s hopes for independence, unify the partitioned Polish society – living under the rule of three different invaders – in its efforts to preserve its culture and finally shape patriotic attitudes and present the heroism of Poles in their fight for independence. Thus, theatre served didactic functions.

In the 19th century we could observe further development of human fascination with theatre – realism emerged on stage. The trend was oriented to getting to know a human being, their environment and the motives behind their actions. Alexander Dumas claimed that realistic theatre “sets itself the task of unmasking social evil, deliberates on the relationship between the individual and society and wishes to be a theatre useful to people, both in a literal and metaphorical meaning of the word” (Berthold, 1980, p. 447).

The above-mentioned usefulness of theatre has not always been understood in the same way. Nevertheless, in any historical epoch people were aware of the fact that it constituted a very potent driving force.

Towards the end of the 19th century another trend emerged in theatre – naturalism. The protagonists of theatre plays begotten at that time were people (groups of people) who experienced a series of difficulties and who deeply felt the hopelessness of human existence. Poverty, marginalization and degeneration of values appeared on stage. Plays which took up subjects typical of the literature created after 1914

left a particularly distinctive impression on the history of theatre. In the authors' works and later on in their stage productions one could observe perhaps all the social problems of a given country. The staged plays drew attention to the existing injustice and gave rise to thoughts about one's own life.

Other trends which emerged in art in the following years – some of them quite innovative – all affected theatre in one way or the other. Even if they appeared on stage for a short time only, their influence on the playwrights' output as well as on the style of the stage productions never went unnoticed and manifested itself in the choice of new subjects and new means of expression.

In the interwar period the need to expand the offer addressed to the audience was perceived. The idea was not to propose a ready-made stage product to the audience, thus turning it into a passive recipient, but instead to make the audience an active participant co-producing – to an extent – a given performance. In fact, those were not the first attempts at activating the audience in the history of theatre, since such forms were popular already back in ancient times. The level of social involvement in such undertakings was different, but the sheer fact of taking up dialogue (co-operation) pointed to the need for developing the area in which it would be possible to establish contact between the actors and the audience.

Theatre has been subject to incessant evolution, hence the frequently posed questions about the condition of theatre and the kind of repertoire which is capable of reaching the recipients and fulfilling certain tasks such as activating and motivating society to undertake actions with a view to introducing positive changes in personal and community life.

In principle, the tasks of the institution of theatre have remained unchanged for ages, whether we speak about ancient theatre, Brecht's theatre or modern theatre. What is happening on stage is supposed to be of use to people.

Modern theatre, regardless of the time and place, and regardless of whether it chooses to raise the problems of everyday life or rather cherish historical achievements, will always be a place in which our life is constructed and reconstructed. It can be expressed in the following words:

"As long as the audience remembers that it contributes to the creation of theatre and that it is not only a passive consumer of art, as long as it insists on its right to spontaneous participation in a theatre performance by means of approval or protest, theatre will not cease to be a stimulating element of human existence" (Berthold, 1980, p. 550).

Every historical period created certain possibilities for human existence. The life of every person is conditioned by many different factors which facilitate or hinder efficient existence. Apart from those factors, often entirely beyond our influence,

there is a whole array of behaviour patterns, attitudes, skills and intentions which make it possible for us to make full use of what our reality offers to us.

The ongoing modern transformations and their social consequences encourage young authors to make current social reality the subject of their works. They readily do it, counting on the considerable interest of the general public or their local community that such subjects are likely to arouse.

The authors entangle their protagonists in the problems of poverty, homelessness, unemployment. They are depicted as inadequate individuals struggling with a sense of failure, deprived of prospects. Such people feel unwanted and disapproved of. And since in everyday life such situations very often lead to other adverse phenomena, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, moral corruption or crime, theatre play characters also function in degenerated spaces. Watching modern plays one cannot help but get the impression that the performances reflect the reality one is so familiar with.

When theatre makers so readily “transfer” reality onto stage, the question arises about the reason for it. An unequivocal answer is perhaps impossible, but it makes sense to think about it.

In the light of such a high incidence of difficult situations people undertake actions which are supposed to eliminate the difficulties and facilitate human life. In our country it is done through social aid centres and nongovernmental organizations offering support. However, even a very superficial evaluation of the effectiveness of such actions makes us reach the conclusion that the compensation efforts are nowhere near satisfactory. From the perspective of pedagogical practice the most desirable initiatives are those which can improve living conditions to a certain extent.

It is a common conviction that only these institutions can be of help which are deliberately established to serve such a purpose, like the above-mentioned social aid centres. Meanwhile, the scale and diversity of difficult life situations creates a need to search for different solutions, sometimes in places, where it does not seem legitimate. Why should not we then make use of the possibilities that theatre offers? Why should not this social institution be more actively involved in aid? All the more so, because already in the past theatre revealed its inclination to be a social institution which would serve society in the different fields of its activity.

Depicting the difficult reality, modern theatre art wishes to provoke the audience's reflection, which will not only result in greater awareness of a given problem of an individual, but also contribute to greater activity and readiness to act in order to improve individual and collective living conditions.

Art is not only an artistic event (experience), it is also – now more than ever – a social practice. Thus, it is more and more often analysed within the context of sociological convention and perceived as one of the elements of the social system, which fulfils certain functions as part of it. (cf. Krajewski, 1995).

If this is the way art is perceived now, then such content pertains to theatre as well, which forms part of it.

Modern theatre is perhaps one of the most important instruments of communication that human beings have at their disposal. It is a peculiar *laboratory*, where we can carry out experiments. Every performance triggers off reflections on our own life, but also educates us so that we can make good choices between good and evil in real life, so that we can avoid mistakes and erroneous solutions which we get to know (experience as members of the audience) while watching the play. It is an extremely precious method of solving one's own problems. Observing the dangerous consequences of some of the situations acted out on stage we can "try out" different solutions, we can try to avoid them, we can try to get accustomed to them and finally learn to cope with them (Hausbrandt, 1983, p. 50).

It is worth noticing that modern theatrical formula, due to its content and the desire to acquire and activate its audience, departs from the presentation of a given work on stage with the use of a stage set which imitates reality and moves towards authentic scenery which was the prototype of the scenario. Such challenges are first and foremost taken up by young directors, who are interested in reaching the widest possible audience, especially people to whom theatre has been unavailable so far. The above-mentioned group of young artists comprises people interested in the co-operation with local communities. It is a sign of our times that recognized authors stage their theatre projects not only in the biggest national centres, but also in smaller towns, where theatrical formula used to be conservative and petrified and whose theatres used to go unnoticed by the artistic milieu and the critics interested mainly in what was going on in Warsaw, Kraków or Wrocław.

The time of changes involved theatre also thanks to the young authors who were able to perceive the problems significant for the local communities, who saw their potential and decided to activate the locals, to change their way of thinking as well as the image of their towns and cities. There are more and more of such examples of joint work – involvement of the local communities in the creation of theatre – in our country. Among other things, there are the theatre groups from Legnica, Wałbrzych and Nowa Huta. The above-mentioned towns are characterized by a similar social situation, a relatively high unemployment rate, a high level of poverty, a sense of lack of prospects, rising crime rates and moral corruption. Theatre makers working in those towns started their activity from encouraging the

residents to visit their theatres, places which were beyond the sphere of interests of most of them. They used different methods – ticket for the neighbour, symbolic 1 zloty ticket, staging performances outside the theatre building with free admission, different advertising campaigns. The next step in establishing dialogue was the idea of producing a play which would be of interest to the inhabitants of a given town, which would tell their story and which would also be prepared by them. Thus, members of the local community were asked to tell some stories from their lives and the life of the town and to bring some objects which they associate with those experiences. The authors' appeal met with a positive reaction of the residents and in a short time scriptwriters had enough material to create scripts for the new performances on the basis of the stories told. The participation of the town dwellers was not limited to their role of chroniclers, as theatre directors engaged some of them instead of professional actors to play some parts in the performances. That is how *Ballada o Zakaczawiu* and *Made In Poland* were born in Legnica, *Kopalnia* came into being in Wałbrzych and *Mieszkam tu* and *Cukier w normie* were staged in Nowa Huta.

Many residents of those towns have adopted the attitude of waiting for someone to come and change something in their lives, to stimulate the town to action, to bring hope for improvement of their living conditions. Such hope has already been raised, even if only to a small extent, thanks to theatre. The theatre authors provoke their audience and expect its reaction, some kind of feedback, not only in the form of thank yous for the experience offered, but also in the form of practical solutions to the difficult situations of the inhabitants.

The examples quoted are examples of cultural education of society and of the possibility of integration and identification with the place we live in. There is a chance to turn the everyday life of town dwellers into art that they themselves co-produce. It is about creating the sense of being needed and responsible for one's own life. Theatre may be a wonderful factor activating the members of local communities to make efforts in order to change their lives. The above examples of stage productions show us that theatre makers decided to place confidence in local residents, to give them the chance and hope for change that they can make happen on their own. The message of modern theatre is the following: members of the audience are not supposed to be passive recipients of a ready-made product, they are supposed to think and act and be creative.

The actions carried out by the above-mentioned theatre groups might be related to Joseph Beuys's concept of *social sculpture*. According to the concept, apart from materials traditionally used by sculptors, one can also shape human reality, both the external and internal one, leading it out of chaos through forming order out

of it. "To form the social system like a sculpture – this is my task and such is the task of art as well. When a human being gets to know themselves as an individual who can decide about their future, they are also capable of shaping the content of the world" (Beuys, 1990; cf. Kaczmarek, 1995, p. 67).

From a pedagogical perspective, we could say that theatre plays the compensation, prophylactic and educational roles in the communities of different regions. Far from negating the work of institutions whose prime function is to offer aid and support to people in difficult situations, it might be worth making use of the help offered by theatre as well and thus contributing to the revitalization of the areas hostile to man. If theatre wants to and can satisfy human needs, we should allow it to do so. (Witalewska, 1983, p. 25).

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